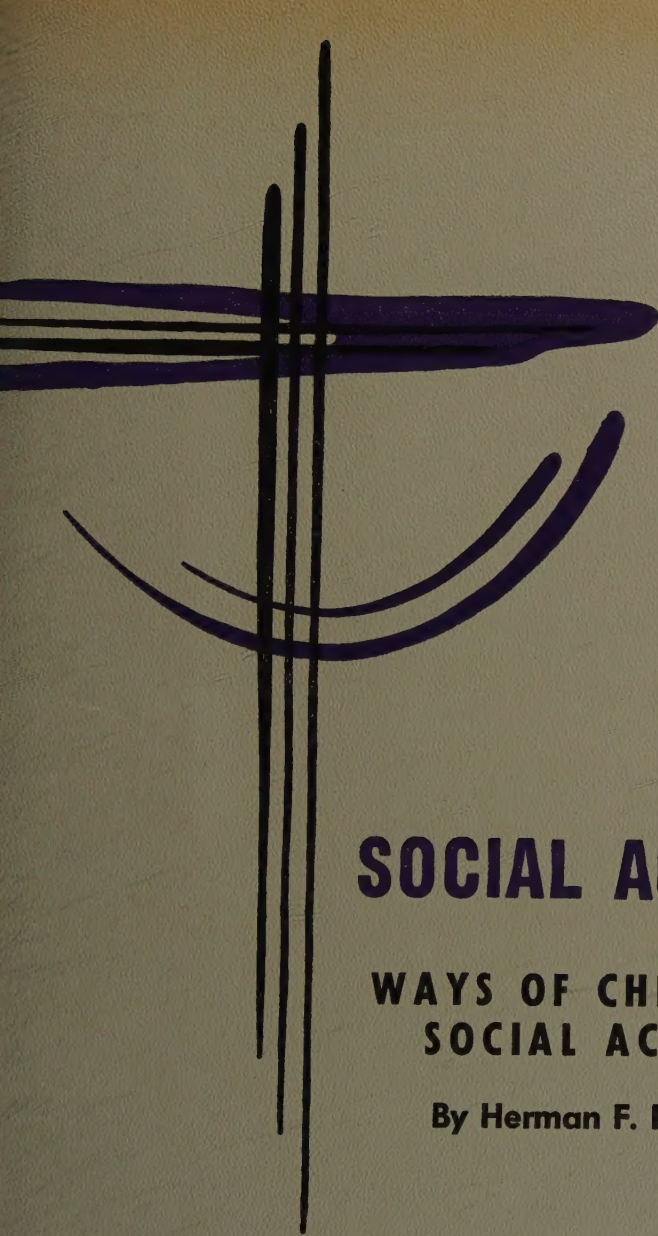


February 1954



SOCIAL ACTION

**WAYS OF CHRISTIAN
SOCIAL ACTION**

By Herman F. Reissig

25¢

The purpose of SOCIAL ACTION is to assist its readers in their efforts to understand, in the light of the Christian faith, issues that continually arise in social and political life, and to find effective ways of action with respect to them. It claims no authority except as it is able to appeal convincingly to the Christian conscience. Responsibility for its contents is assumed by the Editorial Board, the Editor, and the individual writers.

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Prefatory Note

Our writer this month, the Rev. Herman F. Reissig, is well known to readers of this magazine as International Relations Secretary of the Council for Social Action. He came into the Congregational Christian fellowship from the United Lutheran Church, a fact which has given him an exceptional background for studying the social function of the church. He has had extensive pastoral experience, from which many of his insights have come. He has made several trips to Europe, serving as exchange preacher and relief director. In 1952 he conducted the European Seminar of the Council for Social Action.

Mr. Reissig has won high esteem and confidence in Protestant and ecumenical circles by his courage and honesty, his intellectual ability, and his social sensitivity. He has written informally and persuasively for *Social Action* on other occasions, and we are gratified that he has accepted a very special assignment for this issue.

—F. E. J.

Ways of Christian Social Action

That social action is one of the requirements of the Christian life is now accepted by almost all American Christians. Even among those—a decreasing number—who say religion has nothing to do with politics and economics, there is usually no objection to organized Christian action in certain areas—for example, against the liquor traffic and gambling. But if there is almost unanimous agreement on the basic proposition—that Christians must apply their religion to social issues—why are the churches so slow to make practical arrangements for continuous and effective social action a part of their life? And why is there still so much questioning and argument about the place and the goals of social action?

Progress in social action in our American church life appears to be slowed up by three major road blocks.

1. Many Christians are either dubious about, or definitely opposed to, some of the methods used in current social action projects and, also, to some of the goals, or reported goals, of this work. Their argument is not against social action as such but against specific methods and objectives. Not liking what they hear about current social action agencies or objectives, they decide to keep themselves and their churches apart from the whole business.

2. A good many church members understand the importance of applying their faith and ideals to social issues and they try to do their best, as individuals, to make the application, but they are against social action by the churches, or by groups within the churches, especially if it involves the effort to influence government. This attitude stems, in part, from a fear of marring the unity of congregational life by the introduction of controversial social issues. In part, it grows out of an interpretation of the American doctrine of the separation of church and state.

In the Congregational Christian Churches it rests also on the view that concerted action, by the denomination or its agencies, is a violation of Congregational principles.

3. Very large numbers of Christians feel that they as individuals and also their church ought to be more effective in applying the Christian faith to social issues, but they are stopped, or slowed up, by practical difficulties. Questions to which they have not found good answers are: Just how, in an average church, do we go about it? What specific things can we do? How do we get around the objection that there are already too many activities and meetings? Where can we find competent leadership? What does a minister do if most or many of his people are indifferent to social issues? What can lay members do if the minister isn't interested? These good church members are not opposed to what they know about current social action methods and goals, nor are they looking for excuses for inaction. They say, in effect, "Show us *how!*"

In this article we shall try to give some practical suggestions on "how to go about it." Some of our weakness is due, however, to the fact that we just do not care enough. Perhaps we were once alert and sensitive but now, for various reasons, we have become complacent. It is also true that some of our difficulties on the practical level are due to confusion about fundamental convictions and viewpoints. Before we talk about practical methods let us, therefore, take a quick look at some of the human needs that summon us to action and then examine again the underlying principles of Christian social action.

Lest We Forget!

Let us take a moment to remind ourselves of some facts.

Only about one-third of the world's men, women, and children have enough to eat. The undernourished two-thirds—some of them starving—are also denied proper medical care and even the most elementary education. Can a Christian be satisfied with that situation?

Before the ruins of the last world war are cleared away and

long before its bitter griefs are forgotten, men and women are bent down by the fear of another, and greater, outbreak of frightfulness. Were we really meant for this? Is there nothing you and I can do?

People with white skins make up only about one-third of the human family. Yet, in spite of great recent improvements in our own country, the world has a long, long way to go before color is taken only as an interesting fact, never as a factor in judging personal worth or social acceptability. Who that takes his Christian faith seriously can be quiet in his heart when millions of children born of colored parents must grow up in communities that shut doors in their faces, even the doors of Christ's church?

Where the worst forms of physical want are on the way to being overcome, as in the United States, our machine civilizations have created new hazards to personality. The pressures of speed, the size and complexity of our institutions, the new temptations resulting from great wealth and the tendency to make the acquisition of *things* the dominant goal, the threat of the mass-mind to free and creative personalities, the danger to democratic control inherent in the very size of governments and the number of problems with which they have to deal—these are a few of the things which demand study and action by those who care about people.

The problem of harmonizing freedom and order is by no means solved. An industrial society whose members are highly interdependent cannot permit the same kinds and degrees of individual liberty that were possible in simpler and smaller agricultural economies. But the demands of order, justice, and social security could push us to the point of abridging the freedom required by growing and creative persons. The problem calls urgently for the attention of Christians.

Suddenly—too suddenly for our own good and the world's well-being—Americans have been given almost frightening responsibility in the international community. The heavy demands, coupled with our lack of experience, drive some of us

to an impatient desire that the United States go it alone, while others demand a blustering and domineering approach to other nations. Prayerful thought and action are certainly required of us at this point.

The list of issues on which Christian guidance and action are needed is long. To those we have mentioned these may be added: crime and juvenile delinquency, and better methods of dealing with them; the existence of huge slum areas in all our major cities; the clash of Protestant and Roman Catholic opinions on public education; the new needs felt by a highly mobile population; the unsatisfactory family life and inadequate provision for education that prevail in our large migrant population; the special and by no means diminishing problems of the drug habit and alcoholism; and the urgent need for higher ethical standards in government.

The mature person, and especially the Christian, will not throw up his hands in despair. God is not dead. And there are many islands of health from which we can proceed against our sea of troubles. One thing is sure: complacent in the presence of all these threats to human well-being, Christians can never be.

Where Social Action Begins—and Ends

Christian social action, when it is truly Christian, starts from a conviction and a personal devotion. The conviction is that persons—individual men, women, children—have an altogether unique place in the world. They are made in the image of God and are, in their separate and individual existences, dear to Him. All other things, created by God or fashioned by man, are of secondary importance. The person is the crown of creation, and the value of everything else on earth is to be judged by its service to persons as the offspring of God.

As persons are unique in creation, so each individual person is unique in the family of persons. No person is to be used simply as a means; he is an end in himself. He has, therefore, rights and an ultimate worth independent of the attitudes and estimates

of his fellowmen. To serve the good of persons is the function of all human institutions and social arrangements.

Christians not only hold this conviction; they are moved to do something about it. The key word here is "love," not in the sense of a sentimental attachment but of a deep desire to give each person the best possible chance to live as a child of God is meant to live.

To say that social action starts with the individual person may surprise some people who have been cool toward social action in the church, or opposed to it. It may even surprise some fervent supporters of social action. But if the supporters keep their eyes on this fact and if the opponents understand what a person is and how he is related to other persons, some of the mistakes and misunderstandings may be avoided. Whatever their other differences, Christians can stand together on this basic proposition: to help individual persons fulfil their God-given destiny is the starting point and motive of all Christian effort.

What other motive *could* we have? The Christian Gospel is the good news that human beings, taken one by one, are dear to God and that He lived on earth in Jesus Christ to prove it. Christianity is, through and through, a personal religion. It starts with a personal God—not a blind Force or Power but a conscious, thinking, striving personal being. God's revelation of Himself was not given through a law or a set of principles, an institution or a book, but through a person. And the purpose of God, as expressed in Christ, is not to establish a philosophy or a set of social arrangements but to do something with men and women in their individual persons. "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" is *personal* good news.

Jesus was so consistently and wholly personal in his teaching that he aroused a storm of opposition. His contemporaries were attached to their institutions—the Sabbath, the temple. They put great store by their social customs—the ceremonial washing of feet, the physical separation of the righteous from sinners. They all but worshipped "the law." They were fanatical in their devotion to "Israel." Jesus cut straight through all these social

conceptions and arrangements to the individual person. The person was not to be judged by his loyalty to social institutions; social institutions were to be judged by their service to the person. "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." But quite apart from specifically Christian conceptions, we cannot even talk about "moral values" or about good and evil except in relation to persons. The goodness or badness of anything consists in its being good or bad in and for individual persons. There is simply no way to measure right and wrong, except in relation to "one or more of those beings enclosed within a skin, born of woman, subject to natural death, denominated by a proper name, and numerable in the census."*

So, it seems clear enough, Christian social action begins with personal worth, personal need, personal responsibility, personal destiny. It does *not* start with societies, institutions, laws, governments, social orders. Its attention is centered on individual men and women.

All this can be said without reservation. But every statement of truth is subject to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. And when we try to express a truth about life with clarity and emphasis we usually find that we have under-emphasized, or neglected, some related truth. Seeing life "whole" is not only difficult: it is, for human beings, impossible.

To say that Christian social action keeps its eyes, from beginning to end, on the person is true only if we understand what a person is and how persons are helped or hurt. The Bible never sets the "personal" over against the "social." The problem does not arise at all. It cannot arise because persons are created social beings. Or, rather, life does not reach the level of personality until there is conscious and constant interaction between particular individuals. Almost the first distinguishing mark of personality is speech. And speech is a social activity. The word "personal" is commonly misused—as if it meant "private" or "apart" or "individual." There can be no such thing as a purely

* Quoted from *Puritanism and Democracy* by Ralph Barton Perry.

private existence. Nor can there be a private religion. "Personal work" is simply work that deals with persons and "personal religion" includes, must include, our relationships. There is a distinction between "private" and "public" and there is a difference between apartness and togetherness, but there is no dividing line between "personal" and "social" because social concerns are always related to persons and persons are always social beings.

The New Testament is wonderfully direct and simple about this. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God . . . This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is *like unto it*, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." We *try* to isolate ourselves from others (self-centredness) but this, according to the Bible, is the essence of sin.

Social orders, organizations and institutions cannot be neglected by those who want to help persons because there is constant and vital interaction between persons and the existing social structures and patterns of action. We express ourselves partly through the structures and customs of our society and these, in turn, have a constant and direct influence upon our minds and emotions. Men and women may be "much the same everywhere" but they are also different, and the differences, as between large groups of people, are created largely by differences in the social environment. Persons can rise above their environment and help to change it, but they are still powerfully influenced by it, favorably or unfavorably.

Institutions such as the church and the family become so necessary to persons and so inwardly a part of them that it is possible to speak of the institutions as having a life and value of their own. They are not, in the bald sense of the term, merely instruments through which persons are served. Certainly, such institutions are not to be accepted, changed, or cast aside on the narrow basis of one person's or one generation's estimate of their value as instruments of personal well-being. The church of Christ is more than the sum of its human parts and it can be judged by its "service to individuals" only if membership in "the body of Christ" is seen to be a necessary part of the

Christian's relationship to God. This requires emphasis because the individualistic mood of liberal Protestantism has too little appreciation of the objective value of social institutions as means to the enrichment of persons. If we can stand apart from the church, for example, and judge it, the church also stands, in towering majesty, apart from us and judges us.

If, therefore, someone prefers to say that social action is mainly concerned with the institutions, practices and structures of society, or thinks primarily in terms of church, government, family, business organization, labor union, we need not quibble about ways of expressing our motive and goal—*provided* we never permit ourselves to forget that everything comes back at last to persons—their salvation or destruction.

When you have said that the central business of social action is with persons you have not yet explained what you are driving toward. What *is* the goal? What are Christian social actionists trying to do? What do they hope to achieve?

If you ask these questions, here are some of the answers you will probably get: "We are trying to build a better world." "We are working for a more Christian world." "Our goal is the Kingdom of God on earth." "We are striving to establish the reign of Christ in all areas of life." But such conceptions of the purpose of Christian social action are unsatisfactory. They are unsatisfactory because they are based on illusions about what human beings can do and on a mis-reading of the Christian faith.

If the goal is said to be the building of a better, or a more Christian, world, it's fair to ask for evidence that the world is getting better. Is it? It's an old debate, but one would have a hard time proving that the world is a morally and spiritually better place in 1954 than a hundred or five hundred years ago. The use of napalm, for example, hardly represents a moral advance over the bow and arrow. Hitler and Stalin are not half-forgotten names in ancient history!

I recall an argument with a friend of mine twenty-five or more years ago. He asserted that the world was not getting better, that there was no evidence of moral progress. I main-

tained, with some vehemence, that he was mistaken. But every time I pointed to an evil that had been moderated or abolished he pointed to a new evil, perhaps a greater one. To me faith in God was tied up with confidence in progress toward a better world, and I angrily rejected what I called his cynicism. That was before the second World War, before the gas chambers of Hitler and the slave labor camps of Stalin, before Hiroshima and the armament race of the Cold War. I was not the only one to discover that if we are to go on praying and working we shall need something more solid to stand on than the belief in progress.

But did not Christ teach us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"? Why pray for the kingdom to come if there is no evidence that it is coming? The answer seems to be that we have misunderstood the prayer. The Gospel does assure us that evil will be vanquished and that Christ will reign supreme. But no one who heard the Lord's Prayer from the lips of Christ, and none of the early Christians, imagined that the kingdom was going to be established by human striving. They prayed that *God* would bring it to pass. They never supposed they could do it, no matter how "Christian" they were or how hard they worked. They did not even think the kingdom would come as the result of a working partnership between God and Christians. It was to be God's doing, His alone. And when the great action would take place they did not know. "neither the day nor the hour." They did expect it would occur in their lifetime, and in this they were mistaken.

The difference between modern Christians and earlier Christians with respect to the coming of God's kingdom is this: They believed it would come suddenly, probably in their lifetime, and that it would be a strictly divine action—for which they could only pray and wait. Modern Christians have believed it would arrive gradually, the world moving nearer to it by slow degrees, and that progress toward it depends mostly on the wisdom, goodness, and effort of human beings—with, as we say, God's help.

If earlier Christians were right, if nothing you and I do brings

the final victory of Christ nearer—if, that is to say, the world doesn't get better through our efforts—where are we going to find the courage to go on striving? We must think about this. For if courage for moral effort comes from evidence of success, where will the courage be if the success is not in evidence? Is there any point in all our earnest efforts if we cannot have the definite assurance, or at least the reasonable hope, that the world is making progress toward the kingdom of God?

For our answer let us go back to the statement that to help individual persons fulfil their God-given destiny is the starting point and motive of all Christian effort. The obligation laid on us is not to usher in that "far-off, divine event toward which the whole creation moves." That will, in truth, be, when it occurs, a *divine* event. Our obligation is simpler, nearer, more concrete. We are to keep our minds on actual, flesh-and-blood individuals, loving them because God loves them and desires their fulfillment as His children. And because our love, like the love of God, is not merely a sentimental disposition toward persons but a positive desire for their spiritual development we are bound to help create for them the conditions most favorable to their development. Where, for example, there is no access to education we must see what we can do to supply it because, in so far as the mind remains untrained and uninformed, the person is not on his way to the fulfillment of his God-given destiny. We shall also, on the other hand, see what we can do to remove positive obstacles to personal growth. Human slavery, for example, debases both master and slave. It is a spiritual handicap. Therefore, Christians were bound to fight for its removal.

Another, and perhaps better, way to define the goal of Christian social action is to say that we are not, in any final sense, responsible for saving men, individually or collectively; we are only responsible for making it as easy as possible for the saving love of God to reach them. We are to "make straight" in this world of ours "a highway for our God." It should be clear that this interpretation of the goal of social action does not mean we must "leave it all to God." Nor should anyone conclude that

if the world doesn't get "better" moral effort is not worth while. Only God can establish the reign of love and peace and joy but our faith in God's final victory includes the indestructible hope that all we have hoped and dreamed and all our striving toward a better life helps to prepare the way and will be a part of the kingdom when it comes. This is a faith which moves us to work constantly, with courage and with passion, for justice, freedom, peace. It is also a faith that saves us from the self-righteous fanaticism of those who suppose themselves to be the real executives of kingdom-of-God building—and from the despair of those who, having trusted too much in themselves, leave the field because the enemy is not vanquished.

Individual Ends and Social Means

Though Christians agree that the aim of all human endeavor must be the growth and welfare of persons there is not complete agreement on how we should work toward this end. Some Christians say something like this: Teach individuals the ideals of love, honesty, benevolence, and the like, and then let each one work in his own way, serving God and man through individual example and action. They believe in action but they do not like the term "social action." They set "social" and "individual" over against each other, as if somehow, they were basically opposed.

It must be said, of course, that it is possible so to emphasize the social as to lose sight of individual men and women. We can get in the habit of thinking in terms of societies, communities, crowds, masses, classes, races, nations, humanity, until the individual faces disappear. We then see only wholesale goals and wholesale means. We think in terms of movements, institutions and social orders. This is a natural tendency because it is not possible for the human mind completely to individualize masses of people. Even in a small social unit like the home we cannot always think solely in terms of mother, father, Helen, Jim, Arthur. We have to use social terms such as "the family," "parents," "the children." We have to plan in terms of the

family, and act as a family. Even in the home, then, we must use social concepts and engage in group action.

But the family is an excellent illustration of the fact that if you want to serve the individual you need not confine yourself to purely individual action. *Individual ends can be furthered by social means.* The individual members of a family thinking and *acting as a family* for the good of all the members of the family is a good illustration of Christian social action.

In what ways do the members of a family help themselves and each other? Sometimes the individual members act alone and sometimes they act together. Action taken by the individual is not necessarily on a higher moral level than action taken together. Quite the opposite may be true. But whether they act as individuals or as a social unit, the goal is the welfare of persons.

The same is true when we move on from the family to the neighborhood, the nation and the world. For the good of individuals we may act in individual fashion, or in concert with others in voluntary organizations, or through government. When individuals act together in and through government they may be acting on just as high a moral and spiritual plane as when they act singly, or in non-governmental organizations.

A Family Welfare Society, a Community Chest, a labor union, a city government, a League of Women Voters are illustrations of individual ends served by social means. Sometimes, in fact, resort to social action is the only effective way to help individuals. A person cannot protect himself against floods, epidemics, or bombs by acting alone. The community as a whole must act by unofficial agreement or through government. The individual person's right to worship according to the dictates of his own conscience is largely an abstraction unless he joins with others in providing a church in which to worship. (Even private worship depends on the training and materials provided by the organized Christian fellowship.) The right to educate himself isn't of much use to a man until action on the part of the community (social action) has put books and schools within his reach.

Any number of illustrations could be given. There is no real contrast, in actual experience or in moral value, between individual action and social action.

Some Christians deny the need of social action in the churches because, they say, individual Christians should be left alone to make their own application of Christian principles. The church, they think, should confine itself to preaching and teaching basic truths. Each church member can then determine for himself what to do, as a Christian, in specific instances and concrete situations. People who feel like this are not, it may be observed, thoroughly consistent. They do not usually object to quite practical and specific suggestions for applying religion to family life or to psychological problems. They are glad to have information on just how religious truths can help us overcome worry or keep friends or achieve success. The objection usually arises when the talk comes around to politics, economic practices, or race relations.

But almost the first discovery we make when we try seriously to apply Christian principles to international relations or economic life is our need of help. What, for example, should Christians think about the United Nations? The Bible does not mention the organization. How, then, does one relate what the Bible does say to this specific, contemporary problem? To get the answers we need two kinds of help. We need accurate knowledge of biblical teaching and also accurate information on the United Nations. What church member will claim he can provide both without help from others? Those who are both students of the Bible and careful observers of the U.N. will be the first to confess that they need the help of other minds. There is no self-sufficiency here—not even among the most experienced and expert.

There must never, of course, be any attempt to prevent individuals from doing their own thinking and from following an individual course of action. The point we are trying to make is that all of us need to have our information increased and our insights corrected by others who are working on the same problem. In October, 1953, four hundred Christians met for three

days to think about American responsibility in the present world situation. They came from different parts of the country, had varying backgrounds, represented many vocations, and had widely different kinds of experience. They began their discussions with "working papers" prepared in advance. These working papers had for the most part been written by one person, following discussion of the subject by a group. The first draft was presented for criticism by the same group. It was then re-written, subjected once more to group thinking, re-written once more, and so on, until the final paper bore, perhaps, little resemblance to the first effort. But in long hours of discussion at the national conference there were again additions, subtractions, corrections. More than one delegate, who thought he knew something about a particular subject, discovered that his knowledge and insight were not as great as he had supposed. The writer of this article was very thankful that the delegates took some material on which he had worked hard and made it far more comprehensive and wise than it was in the first place.

So, on the first level of social action—the level of investigation and study—you and I need the help of other minds. Group-thinking is not always wiser than private thought. Often, incidentally, it lacks precision and punch, because so many views are incorporated in the result. But when we deal with complex social issues it approaches the ridiculous to suppose that one person's opinion or the opinion of people from one vocation or class is an adequate basis for public policy.

When we come to action—well, let us take an illustration. In a Midwestern city many white persons were sensitive to the deplorable lack of opportunity for the Negro population. One woman discovered a Negro girl with a fine singing voice who was working as an elevator operator. Personal interest and private gifts of money provided training for the girl and today she is acclaimed as a concert singer. Splendid! But it was organized social action that was responsible for a new housing development where Negroes could live. It was the social action committee of one of the white churches that started an interracial,

interdenominational committee which, in turn, persuaded employers to give better jobs to Negroes and which raised a fund whose proceeds are used to send able Negroes to college.

The need for group influence and concerted action and, conversely, the almost complete futility, in many situations, of purely individual action, really does not need to be argued. Americans, above all people, are quick to join hands when they want to get something done. Christian social action pleads that Christians, *as Christians*, work together at the business of applying their faith to social problems. Members of a church meet together to talk about raising money; why not about raising the level of thinking about the U.N.? They meet to elect a new pastor; why not to talk about electing better city councilmen and U.S. Congressmen? They meet to hear reports on the internal life of the church; why not to hear a report, prepared by the social action committee, on slum clearance or wheat for India? Christians hold in common some beliefs and ideas that need to be put to work in concrete situations. Why should there be any hesitancy about consulting with one another on community, national, and international problems; and then proceeding to act together in whatever ways we can agree upon?

The Special Function of Social Action

God helps persons in many different ways to develop their capacities. Which means that if our task is to clear the channels through which His love can come to men there are many different ways of going about it.

One of the most helpful things we can do is to mind our own business. We help other persons when we are not thinking about helping them but do our work as well as we can, meet our own problems with intelligence and courage, keep our heads up in adversity and stay true to our own best selves.

Sometimes we help people most, not by giving them either advice or material things, but by letting them know through our words and our manner that they are not alone in their troubles

and struggles, that we care about them. A quiet kind of understanding friendship is one of the most effective ways to give people a moral lift.

Bringing men and women into the fellowship of the church is another way, since a true church provides many channels through which the grace of God can reach us. Teaching and preaching—which include information, new insights, appeals to the conscience—can be effective in advancing personal growth and well-being.

The deliberate infliction of punishment may sometimes help—some action which helps to teach a person that he cannot hurt others or play the fool without suffering for it. Punishment, though its good effects are over-rated, may help people to come to their senses. It is by no means always a good thing to provide cushions for the weak or foolhardy to fall on.

None of these ways of serving the good of persons, however, can be called social action, as we are using the term here. Social action takes account of the fact that men and women are helped and hindered by the social environment. The general character of the national life and of the immediate community, the conditions of daily work, the physical surroundings, the character and operation of government, the place of one's special racial, religious or social group in the total community—these things influence persons, depress or encourage them. Man is spirit, and so can rise above his environment. But he is not so completely "spiritual" that he is immune to the external conditions under which he lives.

A simple illustration will suffice. If the physical conditions and the moral character of a neighborhood are considered bad, parents who care about their children do not content themselves with saying that a good and resourceful child will rise above his environment. Neither do they say that the only thing to be done is to change the inner lives of the people in the neighborhood. They either try, through various kinds of action, to clean up the neighborhood or, if they can afford it, they call in a moving van.

Social action looks at the cultural, economic, educational,

political, religious environment and says: "This practice (or situation) seems to be good for persons; let us see what we can do to protect and strengthen it. That practice (or situation) is clearly hurting people; let us see what we can do to change it." Always the starting point is not belief in, or opposition to, any particular social order but belief in the God-given right of persons to the best possible chance to fulfill their destiny and opposition to anything that holds them down. There is no more reason for postponing the effort to change bad situations until everybody responsible for them is wise and benevolent than there would be to confine action against war to getting everyone in the world purged of greed, fear, and love of power.

Social action is not social service—social service has a different function. The difference is best expressed in the old saying that it is good to help people when they have been run over but it is better to try to prevent their being run over in the first place. Social service sets up a settlement house in a slum district. Social action attacks the whole social situation which produces slums. Social service may provide personal help in reestablishing a man who has been in prison. Social action goes behind the individual prisoner to the conditions in the prison, and beyond that to the environment that helps to produce crime. Of course, no sensible person supposes that by improving the environment you automatically abolish crime; he only knows that crime has social as well as psychological and spiritual origins.

The Red Cross is social service. To work on the *causes* of war, floods, and drought is social action. In a local church, social service means giving various kinds of personal help to the poor, the sick, the unemployed. Social action means doing something about community, national, and international situations. This does not mean that those who are interested in social action will not pay attention to social service, or that a clear line always should, or can, be drawn between them. The distinction is made here mainly for the purpose of getting a clear idea of what social action is. When in a certain local church it was decided to call the Social Action Committee the Social Service Committee, those

acquainted with the church knew that what happened was more than a change of name. Social action was suspect. Social service was acceptable.

Let us attempt a one-sentence definition. Trying to be both exact and comprehensive, must we not say something like this: *Christian social action is influence brought to bear by the church or by a group of Christians upon social institutions and practices, for the purpose of giving men, women, and children the best possible chance to live as God wants them to live.*

The Tools of Social Action

Having considered the underlying principles and the special place of social action, let us see how it works in practice. A church, or a group within the church, begins by taking a careful look at a situation that seems to need improvement from the viewpoint of its effect upon persons. The possible situations are almost innumerable. Racial tension—in the community, in the nation, or in South Africa; bad feeling or bad practices in the industrial world; dishonesty and wastefulness in government—local, state, or national; lack of good recreation for young people; poor or insufficient housing; an international situation that threatens annihilation in global war.

If there is agreement that something needs to be done, the next question is "What exactly *is* the situation?" This means patient, clear-eyed study. It means going behind surface facts. It means getting as much information as possible. The group then goes on to ask, "How can the unsatisfactory situation be improved? Who is responsible for it? What is the best approach?" The decision may be that, for the time being, little or nothing can be done. Sometimes it may be best simply to call attention to the problem, without pressing for any special action. There is far more than the ideal goal to be considered. Cool heads are needed as well as warm hearts.

If it is agreed that some kind of action is called for, the type of action will depend on the nature of the problem. There are times when publicity is necessary and other times when it is

best to work without fanfare. Public exposure of a bad situation may help; it may, on the other hand, do more harm than good. If action by individuals or by unofficial groups will get the job done, that will be the way to go about it. Social action does not necessarily mean political action. One of the most important features of American life is the existence of citizens' committees and organizations—thousands of them—organized on a permanent basis or for special temporary purposes. Even in a democracy, where ultimate control of government rests with the citizens, it is a good general rule not to ask government to do something that can be done by individuals and non-governmental agencies.

But everyone understands that government is a necessary tool in some kinds of service to persons. The fire and police departments, the armed forces, and the courts of justice must, we all agree, be provided by government. So, political action is a possible recourse for the social action whose purpose is to make life better for individual persons. What should be done through government and what should be left to individuals and private agencies is often a difficult question. In the areas mentioned above no one today raises the question; they are accepted as functions of government. When a new social situation develops and a new need is apparent we have to decide again—as we once did in the case of fire departments, schools, and highways—whether we help ourselves through government or in other ways. There can be no hard and fast rule. Some Christians will believe in moving ahead with governmental help and some will want to get the job done without recourse to government. When we have agreed upon a general goal, the question of means ought to be decided, not by a prejudice in favor of political action or by a wholesale prejudice against it, but by a calm appraisal of the effect on persons of any and all means.

A Christian Interpretation of Government

Despite what we have just said, many Christians do have a deep suspicion of government and politics. They are, as they would readily avow, against allowing government to "get its hands on our affairs." They are willing to accept government as an umpire in limited fields but they believe strongly in the Jeffersonian saying that "that government governs best that governs least."

This attitude toward government has historical roots. Those who first laid down the dictum that the best government is the least government were speaking against the background of a long and unhappy experience of men with arbitrary, non-democratic governments. And it seemed to them, in the kind of society then existing, that the best way to avoid tyrannical government and serve the good of citizens was to reduce government to the smallest possible dimensions. The memory of ruthless and selfish kings is still with us. The eternal vigilance which John Philpot Curran said is the price of liberty means to us vigilance against any creeping expansion of governmental powers.

In our time we have before us the horrible example of the totalitarian governments, fascist and communist. Every new function added to our own government seems to many of us to have on it an arrow pointing straight to the nightmare of fascism or communism. So, to all such any action that limits government appears good, and any extension of government, bad.

Where does government belong in God's dealing with His people? St. Paul, in a famous passage, said, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God."* To some this seems to be a counsel of submission to whatever any government may do, and on that interpretation we would be obliged to reject it. Government is not God and we have it on high authority that "we must obey God, rather

* Romans 13.1 (R.S.V.)

than men.”* But Paul’s words cannot be dismissed as easily as that. If we go beneath the surface and if we put them in the setting of the whole Christian revelation, their meaning seems to be something like this: *Authority* there must be. Without human authorities there can be no ordered society, and, therefore, no personal well-being. Government, therefore, is not merely a contrivance set up by men. Since it is necessary to human well-being, it must be considered as having divine origin and approval. It is one of God’s instruments—one of the channels through which His providence operates. Government is, in short, a divine institution.

If, because of the obviously bad character of some governments, this statement seems to claim too much, it must be pointed out that, if judged by its misuse, no institution can claim divine sanction—neither the family nor the church. Moreover, while governments can be so injurious that every decent instinct cries out against them, it might be no exaggeration to say that the worst government is better than no government at all. It has been truly said that the first business of government is to govern. That is to say, a government *should* be just but it *must* exercise authority. When in the second World War Germany had been defeated there was almost no authority left in the state; and the first order of the day, for the victors and the defeated, was to establish *some* kind of governmental authority. The authority was, for the moment, more important than its moral character.

Viewed in the light of actual experience, Paul is therefore seen to be stating a profound truth: “There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”

Some contemporary contenders for the least possible government say that the necessity of government is a concession to the evil in men; men are selfish and shortsighted, and therefore must be restrained. Government, in this view, is essentially coercion; coercion is always bad; therefore non-governmental action is

* Acts 5.29

always morally better than action through government. Surely, this is a half-truth!

All our institutions are tributes to the good in men, as well as monuments to their imperfections. Medicine says that man succumbs to sickness; it also says he knows how to create health. Education is necessary because man is ignorant; its existence proves he loves knowledge. The institution of the family points to our inability to love as the citizens of heaven love—where, as Jesus said, “they neither give nor are given in marriage”; it is also a demonstration of our capacity for love and loyalty. The church would not be necessary if men were not estranged from God; its existence shows that they are not happy in the estrangement. So, government is made necessary by man’s selfishness and short-sightedness and it is also witness to his capacity for cooperation and self-discipline. On the one hand, government restrains us from evil or compels us to do the good we would not voluntarily do; on the other hand, we set it up and use it in service to all. Its character is not merely negative; it is negative and positive. It denies and it affirms.

The expansion of government can be dangerous. It can also be made beneficent. The expansion should be under wary eyes, since great power, in individuals or in institutions, is always a temptation to sin, and governmental power, even when subject to the ultimate control of the people, acquires a momentum that can get out of control. But the central problem with respect to government is not how to keep it as small as possible but how to make it function efficiently for the welfare of all the people.

To sum it up: since government is one of God’s instruments in the protection and development of His children—something that He gives them for their advancement—our response to it should be a combination of gratitude, of watchfulness (as with economic or ecclesiastical or parental power), and of constant positive effort to make it a better instrument.

Social Action in the Local Church

Protestant Christians who believe that their religion should deeply influence their thinking and action in every area of life ought to look with favor on setting up a special group in the local church to lead the church in applying the Christian faith to social problems.

Only a small number of churches now have such a committee. The Evangelical and Reformed Church reports between one hundred and two hundred. There are probably more in the Congregational Christian Churches than in any other denomination, but even here the total number is not more than five hundred. And of these, some are inactive, while others exist on the fringes of the church's life, receiving little attention from most of the members. A few local church committees have an adequate conception of their function and provide real leadership. There are, I think, two main reasons for the failure, in the majority of churches, of the social action committee idea to take hold.

Some supporters of social action have misconceived the function and purpose of such a committee. They have created the impression that social action means espousing certain specific views in industrial relations, race relations, international relations, and so on. Social action, in this view, is something for "liberals," whatever that term may mean. Or perhaps, even, it is a scheme for promoting "radical" or "socialistic" ideas. If what we have said in this article has, in the main, been accepted it should not be necessary to spell out the answer to this sorry misconception. We have not advocated either "liberal" or "conservative" social ideas.* We have talked about social action as one of the ways in which the Christian—any Christian—responds to the love of God and to human need. All our basic contentions contradict the notion that social action is something

* The words are enclosed in quotation marks because some people whom "liberals" call "conservatives" think of themselves as the real liberals and progressives. The terms are used here in the popular, not necessarily in the real truth-of-the-matter meaning.

that social "liberals" are trying to import where it does not really belong.

There is, however, this much basis for associating social action with a "liberal" or "progressive" social philosophy. Social action raises questions about prevailing institutions and practices. It reopens some questions that many, perhaps the majority, consider closed. It probes, analyzes, opens doors. It encourages discussion. And it considers no dogma or institution sacrosanct. This is the real meaning of liberalism. (Social "radicals" are not, by any means, always liberals!) *Christian* social action is the most searching, and potentially the most upsetting, kind of action, for it appeals to an absolute goodness and righteousness (the God revealed in Christ) which can never be satisfied with any human arrangement. The profundity and intensity of its concern for persons makes it willing to re-examine accepted practices and institutions and saves it from a fanatical—not to say an idolatrous—support of the customary and traditional.

But conservatives, taken in the large, have a strong tendency to "leave well enough alone." Some conservatives, though not all, seem to be annoyed that viewpoints other than those to which they have been accustomed should be presented at all. If this seems an unfair statement, let me hasten to add that many people who were, let us say, opposed to the whole trend and spirit of Roosevelt's New Deal are real liberals, in the true sense of the word. They believe in free discussion. Questioning of their views does not annoy them. They are not made angry by dissent. The important dividing line is not between two sets of opinions on specific social issues; it lies between the spirit of completely free inquiry—which includes the willingness to listen to criticism and respect for the critic—and the closed mind which wishes to hear only what it already believes. The church forum conducted by the social action committee in one of our churches for some years provides an illustration. The committee made a real effort to present different points of view, which inevitably entailed presenting some speakers who did not represent majority opinion in the community. Among those who supported

the forum were a few people of decidedly conservative opinions. They were present, and friendly, whether they agreed or not. But among the regular attendants those having "liberal" opinions were always in a majority because so many of the "conservatives" were uninterested or objected to free discussion of matters which, for them, were settled.

The crucial requirement of Christians is that they place all human institutions and practices constantly and without reservation under the scrutiny of their faith—free enterprise and socialism, private economic power and government, employers' practices and those of labor unions, America as well as foreign nations, Protestantism as well as Roman Catholicism. This, for members of Christian churches, is the *basic* question—not, "What, precisely, do you think about labor unions, FEPC, federal aid to education?" but, "Are you willing to join with your fellow Christians in a constant, humble, as-objective-as-possible search for Christian light upon all our ways?"

Christians who do this kind of searching, who honestly try to have no final commitment save to the God revealed in Christ, are likely to find themselves at odds with many current beliefs and practices. They will hold some controversial opinions. They will be dissenters, fomenters of "trouble," agitators. Is there any escape from this conclusion? The Christ who said, "My peace I give unto you" also said, "I came not to bring peace but a sword . . . and a man's foes shall be those of his own household." Woe to the church when it upsets no one! A local church in which no strong differences of opinion on social issues intrude themselves into the church life is not necessarily the recipient of a high degree of God's blessing; it may be, rather, a church where Christ is permitted to speak only when He agrees with majority opinions, or with the opinion of the most influential members.

Church members who believe in social action have been given no guarantee that they will be wise or right above all others. They can be assured of their rightness only at the point of insisting that we must approach every social issue with the one

decisive question: "How does it look in the light of the Christian faith?" All Christians who are ready in every area of contemporary life to do serious business with that question, whatever their particular social views, can support a social action committee in their church—or serve on it.

The second of the two main reasons for the small number of churches organized for social action is, I think, a too great reliance on sermons. One says this with a prayer not to be misunderstood because, heaven knows, sermons ought to be better than most of them are. This is no plea for less attention to the sermon on the part of the preacher or lower requirements on the part of the hearers. On the contrary, if churches continue to set aside a half-hour in every service of worship for a sermon the minister and his people ought to agree that nothing less than prolonged and intensive preparation for it will be acceptable.

But the sermon is not a satisfactory instrument for the kind of deep and detailed exploration of social issues on which intelligent Christian action must be based. I remember with no great satisfaction some of my own sermons on social issues. Following one of them a woman remarked, "That was very interesting, but wouldn't it have been better to give it as a lecture in the parish house?" She was entirely right, though I didn't agree until years later. Or that sermon on race relations, preached in a city where the "keep-them-in-their-places" idea was strongly represented! The pulpit should not be silent on this matter, but to refrain from saying anything during the first two years of the pastorate and then to "throw the whole book at them" in a long sermon, even if the preacher tried hard to do it persuasively and in Christian love, was not very good strategy. Those who were already in agreement with the preacher's convictions commended him for his "courage"; it is doubtful if anyone was converted.

Some preachers say little about controversial issues beyond the indirect reference which does no more than repeat what has been said a thousand times. This leaves the worshippers in firm possession of a general—a very general—principle and in un-

disturbed possession of specific attitudes which annul the principle. Other preachers, impatient with the gap between our lofty professions and our every-day words and actions, decide to spell out the meaning of the big Christian ideas. Those who agree are happy to have their opinions supported from the pulpit; those who do not agree are annoyed, perhaps angry.

Somewhere between the reiteration of generalities and the detailed analysis of concrete issues lies the true function of the sermon. The preacher can open some doors, search the conscience, convict us (all of us) of sin. But the sermon *should* move mainly in the area of the universal need and the timeless Gospel, shaking us down from the level of classes and parties and what is transient to where we all stand together before the Cross and the throne of grace.

One way to go beyond soft sermons that never really tangle with difficult social issues and also to avoid trying to settle such issues in the pulpit is to establish a social action committee with the function of leading the whole congregation in thinking about these problems and, where possible, in taking action. The action may be taken by members acting as individuals, or by a group, or by the congregation as a whole.

Let us paint a picture of a possible program in a church. The social action committee is established by vote of the church. Its members are elected at the annual meeting. It works in close cooperation with the pastor, just as do the deacons and trustees. Surveying the whole field of social issues—local, national and international—the committee decides to concentrate on one of them or at the most on two or three. To reach this initial decision may require several meetings. The next step is study and investigation by the committee, including the assembly of printed material and interviews. When the committee has clarified its own thinking, without necessarily arriving at a final conclusion, it is ready for its main job, which is *to get the attention of the whole congregation*. In this effort it will seek the cooperation of the minister, the Women's Fellowship, the Men's Club, and all the other church organizations. It will use the literature table,

the bulletin board, the Sunday calendar—every available means of education the church provides. Informal study groups may be initiated. Special bulletins may be prepared and distributed. The extensiveness of the effort and the length of time given to it will depend on the nature of the subject and on whether it is an emergency or a long-range problem.

Let us suppose the subject is community interracial practices, or the Point IV program. When the educational work has been done on something like an adequate scale the committee may initiate a request for a congregational meeting. In such a meeting there are all kinds of possible action. A resolution expressing the mind of the membership may be adopted. There may be a decision to make a public statement, to present the church's opinion to local or national officials, to appropriate some money, to initiate a community conference, to communicate with national denominational or interdenominational leaders, to make a request of the State Conference or Synod. The decision may also be to continue the study, deferring action to a future time. Perhaps it will be the sense of the meeting that the church should take no stand, leaving the matter to individual discretion. In some churches it may be understood that the social action committee has the right to take positions on some public issues without involving the congregation as such, in the same manner as the minister is given this freedom.

Some such procedure could be followed in almost every church, large or small. There is, to begin with, no commitment whatever on specific issues. There is only an agreement that the church has a responsibility for the social order and for social policies, plus an agreement on the need of special leadership in the church for handling these matters.

Protestant Christians ought not to be satisfied with a church in which discussion of important social issues is confined to the pulpit and to occasional addresses during the week. They ought to insist that opportunity be provided for all the members to take part in the discussion. If we need the minister's help, we need also the help of our fellow lay members! Congregation-

wide discussion ought not to be limited to such questions as repairs to the building, the budget, an evangelistic effort. Here are matters that are important to all of us. We discuss them with fervor outside the church! Does it not seem sensible so to order the church life that we can regularly help one another in deciding what we, as followers of Christ, ought to do? And ought we not to act, whenever possible, not only as isolated Christians, but as the Church of Christ, addressing ourselves in concert to the needs of our time?

Thus, to assist the church in doing a better job of relating its faith to the important public issues of our time is the function of the social action committee.

The Social Action Committee

In addition to what we have already said, the following suggestions, based on experience, may be helpful.

Who should be put on the committee? The three main qualifications are these: First, active membership in the church. Consultants may be brought in from the community but the people who carry the responsibility should be personally and deeply committed to the Christian faith, which means, for one thing, full participation in the worship and work of the church. Second, a committee member should be convinced that Christians must make a more serious effort to relate their faith to public issues and that the church has a responsibility to help its members in this area. A person who thinks the church has "nothing to do with politics or economic questions" would, obviously, not be helpful. Third, look for men and women who are imaginative and resourceful. It does not require great expert knowledge to plan a program of education on a racial situation or on the U.N., but it does take a little imagination. These are the basic requirements. Choose people who have the respect of their fellow-members. Steer clear of people who are so full of one idea or cause that they can't think of anything else. The committee must not be used to push someone's pet panacea. More than one committee has gone out of existence because an aggressive chair-

man, or other member, was determined to follow his favorite line and succeeded only in making everyone tired of the whole business. Let the committee include as many interests and vocations as the membership of the church permits. A businessman can contribute valuable information and insight. A factory worker or labor leader will draw on his special experience. The homemaker knows more about some things than anyone else. Lawyers, teachers, social workers can be very helpful.

If there are men and women in your church who, because of experience and interests, are obviously qualified for leadership on social issues, good! But we must begin with people where they are. All of us are groping and clumsy in this field. If your church does not have "just the right" people for the job, use the best you have—*provided* they meet the three main requirements mentioned above. Try to include a trustee, a deacon, and an officer of each of the regular church organizations.

The Chairman of the Committee. The social action committee, even more than other church groups, depends heavily on the chairman. He, or she, must be prepared to give much time to preparation for the meetings. The chairman must lead without dominating, keep the discussion on the subject without suppressing varying views. If the chairman you want has, at the moment, too many other church responsibilities, let those interested (including the minister and the nominating committee) deliberately plan to free him from other work as soon as possible, on the understanding that he will then head the social action committee.

"The Name Frightens People"

If the words, "social action," are a liability there is nothing to stop us from using some other descriptive term. Some favor "Christian Citizenship." A church might have a "Committee on Public Issues." Another possible name would be "Christian Action." The Presbyterians favor "Committee on Social Education and Action."

But before we decide to discard "social action" as a title we ought, at least, to think about it awhile. "Social" is a good word.

It points to the simple fact that men and women are social beings, never existing apart from others. The emphasis is a needed antidote to the kind of stress on "individualism" which neglects our essential togetherness and sometimes reflects downright irresponsibility. If there are people who think "social" has something to do with socialism, one might ask if we ought to start out on this serious business by appeasing what must be called an inexcusable "know-nothingism." As for the second word in the term, it is passing strange that Americans, of all people, should be afraid of action! Perhaps we should insist on the word in the interest of keeping Americans reminded that they do not passively accept whatever *is*—and keeping Christians reminded that "faith without works is dead"!

"Social action" does, in fact, describe exactly the function and purpose of this part of the Christian life. It says that we propose to do something about social practices and institutions. It says that we are not going to be indifferent to crime, bad government, war, disease, ignorance, industrial strife, racial discrimination. It connotes the acceptance by Christians of responsibility for the social order. Let's be sure that in surrendering a widely used name we are not also moving toward surrender to an un-Christian passivism!

A further reason for going slow in adopting a different name is the fact that the term "social action" has in recent years come into increasing and accepted usage in all Christian communions, Protestant and Catholic. Even where the official name of a church agency is something else, the popular way of talking about the work is to call it social action. As one Congregational State Superintendent put it, "For goodness sake, let's stop this changing names every few years! Just when our churches are getting used to a name we give them something different. The result is confusion."

Some people feel we should use the term, "Christian Social Action." That happens to be this writer's preference, although within the churches the "Christian" part of it might be thought self-evident.

The Minister's Role

The minister should never be the chairman of the committee. But he ought to work in close cooperation with it, consulting often with the chairman, attending the meetings—or most of them, making suggestions, keeping his eyes open for people who would be useful members. He will make sure that the whole church is aware of the committee's work. Most ministers will welcome an occasional suggestion from the social action leaders on emphases that might be made in sermons. If the minister wishes to preach on a controversial subject—such as, let us say, McCarthyism—why should not his sermon be one item in the investigation being promoted by the social action committee, instead of merely an isolated pulpit utterance?

Every minister is bombarded with letters and printed materials on social issues. Some of them, at least, are important. But he has many things to do, and so, with a sigh, he throws many a worthy appeal into the wastebasket. Let him turn over some of them to the social action committee. In this way the minister helps the committee and the committee gives support to the minister.

Substitutes for the Official Committee

We have assumed that a continuously functioning, officially appointed (or elected) committee is the best way to handle social issues in the local church. Is it? On the basis of his experience as a pastor and as a national secretary, this writer is convinced this is the goal at which we should aim. Appointment, or election, of an official committee says, for one thing, that the church takes social action seriously, that it is an integral part of the church's work. It is not something to which the church pays occasional attention when an emergency arises. When a special job needs to be done the minister and officers should not have to spend time finding some people to do it; the accepted agency for leadership is there and ready to function. Local social action leaders should be on the mailing list of the denominational

agency, receiving its regular publications and forming a dependable point of contact with the church. The committees of the State Conference and the Associations should also know that there is in each church a group to which they can turn when state-wide or national action is desired. Conference and Association officers, if not the national agency, should have the names and addresses of local church leaders. If we are going to take social action seriously, we ought not to be satisfied with sporadic action, led by informal or special committees.

Nevertheless, it would be foolish to insist that a uniform pattern be used. Churches that are not yet ready for an official committee or which, for one reason or another, cannot have one may still do valuable work on social issues.

A group of church members may be formed, without official sanction, to study public issues—acting as a quiet leaven in the total fellowship. This has some advantages. People who meet together on their own initiative will sometimes experience a deeper fellowship than officially appointed committees. The fact that the group is not responsible to the church may enable it to do some work which the church as a whole would not sanction. Our churches are made up of all kinds of people who have joined the church for all kinds of reasons. Even though we must never give up the effort to make church membership as such mean something in our social attitudes, there certainly can be no argument against forming groups of sensitive and like-minded people—within the church but not controlled by it.

In some churches where there is no social action committee, one person—on his own initiative or by request of the minister—acts as a point of contact with the state and national denominational agencies and prods the church's members and organizations to study and action. Hundreds of such people are doing effective, if sometimes rather lonely, work.

In many churches the Women's Fellowship is the sole source of social action leadership and does a splendid job. It may even be that more is being accomplished through the large number of women's social action committees than through all other

groups combined. If, therefore, there isn't much prospect of getting anywhere in the church as a whole, let the women's organization take the lead! It might be added, however, that women who need no prodding in this matter ought to be the first to insist that Christian social action is the job of the whole church.

Getting Started

Since there can be no ideal uniform procedure, let us tell some stories of actual recent experience.

In church *A* the members had long felt the need of a better constitution. The new minister, being asked to help prepare one, suggested that provision for a social action committee be included. The C.S.A. sent a "model" draft. With some changes to fit local conditions, this was incorporated in the draft constitution. At the membership meeting the minister gave a little talk on social action in the Congregational Christian Churches. The provision for a social action committee was accepted. At the next annual meeting the church's nominating committee included "Social Action Committee" in the slate of nominees, the committee was elected and began to function. Since the Council for Social Action is one of the three main boards of the church and the denomination has a long history of interest in the social order, this seems a natural and sensible procedure.

Church *B* has a minister and a number of lay people who are deeply concerned about social problems. It was decided as a first step to ask a national social action secretary to preach at a Sunday service. This, too, seems a natural and normal thing to do, for although there are differing views on specific aspects of social action, a democratic and responsible churchmanship ought to be ready to have this part of the denomination's work presented. The minister of this church agreed to the secretary's proposal that, following the church service, about a dozen people meet for dinner. The minister was wise. He invited, not only the woman who stipulates that *all* of her giving to benevolences shall go to the C.S.A. (actual case!) and others who had ex-

pressed their interest, but also representatives of the trustees, deacons, men's club and women's fellowship.

At the end of a three-hour conversation around the table, those present agreed that a recommendation for a social action committee should be prepared and submitted to the church membership. There was no dissent. Since the above happened only a few weeks before the writing of this article, the final result cannot be reported. It will be surprising if, before long, that church does not have an active committee.

The Board of Education in church *C* had, for years, conducted a small monthly Sunday evening forum on social issues. When good leadership was no longer available the forum went out of business. Here are the steps taken by a wise minister—whose personal interest in social issues is never hidden from his people:

1. Without fanfare, the C.S.A. drama, "Social Action Comes to First Church," was presented in the chancel, in place of the Sunday morning sermon. Many of the three hundred people present said, at the end of the service, "That was very interesting. Why don't we do that?"

2. Some weeks later a dozen people were invited to the parsonage for a picnic supper. No cut-and-dried plan was presented. The talk ranged over a wide field. Before the party broke up it was agreed that there should be another meeting for the purpose of considering a concrete proposal.

3. Eight people met in a home and got down to business. One man, a splendid churchman, wondered if the term "social action" wouldn't frighten some people. "Let's do it," he said, "but let's not call it 'social action'!" Others felt that since opposition to the term is based on misunderstanding or on wholly unjustified fears, there ought to be no hedging on what is, essentially, a good and accurate name. It was agreed that the congregation might not be ready to bring a committee into existence at the annual meeting. It was therefore decided that the minister should call a special meeting of the Board of Education, asking this board to appoint a sub-committee on social action. The first assignment of the committee (numbering about 16) would

be to revive and run the Sunday evening forum. It was also decided that at the first forum meeting there would be a report on the National Study Conference on World Order, held in Cleveland last October, and that the social action committee would promote a study of the findings of this conference throughout the church. There was tentative agreement that the committee's second project would be a careful study of juvenile delinquency in the community.

Because of the minister's leadership, which is both courageous and sensible, and the backing of many interested lay people, it seems certain that this church will soon have a strong committee and that, in time, its work will be accepted by the congregation as a useful part of its life.

Help from the National Agency

The Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church, like most other major communions, Protestant and Catholic, maintain national social action agencies. This article has deliberately omitted discussion of the Council for Social Action. Those who are grateful for the C.S.A. and look to it for leadership have sometimes tended to direct too much of their attention to the national agency—as if social action were the Council for Social Action!—and have not given enough attention to education and action in and through their own local churches and state bodies. To critics of the C.S.A. one sometimes feels like saying, "Whatever you may think of the national organization, do you agree that our churches are not giving us the help we need in translating our religion into every-day life—and what do you propose to do about it?" Looking at the denominational and interdenominational social agencies of Protestantism as a whole, one must say that with all their deficiencies (their pitifully small staffs and budgets, for example) they have done much good work. Their printed materials are often excellent. Their institutes and seminars and the public speaking of their officers have provided much information and guidance.

Officers of government, as well as people in business, in the professions, and in all walks of life, have testified to their helpfulness.

But in the local church and community—there lies our chief weakness! If the suggestions and materials produced by the national agencies which are good from any point of view were put to use! The loss to Christian work resulting from mistakes of leadership is, I think, pretty small compared with the loss due to plain inaction and indifference.

So, the emphasis in this writing has been on the main business. And when, in our local churches and communities, we decide to deal in serious fashion with social problems, the national agency stands ready to help. Special study materials on many important issues are available. A popularly written publication—*Christian Community*—is sent without charge to interested pastors, members of social action committees, and to others who request it. *Social Action* magazine, read and appreciated by many in other denominations, is yours for \$1.50 per year. C.S.A. secretaries spend much of their time counselling with local churches and will be glad to visit yours. Seminars and social action institutes are regularly presented.

The C.S.A. can give better service to the churches: it is learning all the time. It can give *more* service, if the denomination provides the financial support. The main question before us now is: Will the State Conferences, the Associations, and, especially, the local churches, with such help as the national agency can give them, recognize that Christians have scarcely touched the fringes of a serious application of their faith to social problems? And will they organize themselves for a more adequate ministry?

—HERMAN F. REISSIG

Editor's Commentary

Mr. Reissig's notable article will be read by many of our subscribers against the background of the Report of the Board of Review appointed by the General Council to evaluate the Council for Social Action. This is as it should be. We have thought it appropriate to draw attention to that document in connection with this issue, which is devoted to "Ways of Christian Social Action." This magazine has no right or disposition to participate in the formulation of official church policies. The Report of the Board of Review will be considered in due course by the General Council. We are concerned, however, with the implications of the Report for social education and action quite apart from questions of denominational structure and policy, and particularly in relation to the local church.

In the language of the Report, Mr. Reissig is dealing with "means" to the realization of "ends." The ends, broadly speaking, are not in dispute: the elements of the "good life" are known and accepted by all Christians. But the means by which they are to be secured are *always* in dispute. In some sense, therefore, the foregoing discussion presents a context in which the significance of the Board's Report may be more clearly seen.

In every congregation one finds this disagreement as to the means employed to attain ends that all agree are desirable. We all want to rid the world of poverty, of disease, and of crime, but there are profound differences of sincerely held conviction as to how it is to be accomplished. For example, our churches have long been sharply divided as to the right way to attack the evils of the liquor traffic. Even on the all-important issue of war and peace the most contrary testimonies are borne by members of the same Christian fellowship.

It follows that we who are devoted to Christian social action must, in our group activities, renounce all dogmatism as to how social problems are to be solved. Even when we feel most certain of our course we are obligated, in the words of the Report, to remember that "an opposing or differing view . . . may also be

Christian." Indeed, our chief grievance against those who oppose all involvement by the church in political affairs has been that they tend to identify Christianity with some particular institution or form of human association which they wish to be immune from criticism. The Christian mind must be an open mind in all matters where practical judgments are involved.

Mr. Reissig's concern is for democratic action, designed and carried out by the members of a free fellowship. Let us look again at his definition: "Christian social action is influence brought to bear by the church or by a group of Christians upon social institutions and practices, for the purpose of giving men, women and children the best possible chance to live as God wants them to live." Some of us may wish to modify that statement slightly. For example, the Editor would contend that action by *individual* Christians, as well as by groups, may be both "social" and "Christian" if it is directed toward bettering a *social* condition. But the principle Mr. Reissig lays down is so authentically Christian that it can scarcely be challenged without calling in question Christianity itself. To reject it would be to reject the gospel. Action, no less than non-partisanship, is enjoined upon us.

Now, how can we cut through this difficulty, which often appears to involve us in contradiction and frustration? The Board of Review warns against partisanship—against commitments that do violence to the convictions of a part of the fellowship. At the same time it says explicitly concerning the denomination as a whole, "The communion, we believe, has no wish that any of its agencies should devote itself to neutralism." Here are two principles that seem to point in different directions. The problem is to reconcile them. *Our* problem here is to find their application to the local congregation.

The Board proposes an objective which the Editor of this magazine would like to avow as his own in every effort to analyze a social problem: to "present all essential aspects of every controversial question with which it deals on which Christians may fairly differ." This prohibits identifying the Gospel

with the New Deal or the Old Deal; with what is sometimes called "Christian socialism" no less surely than with what economists call laissez-faire capitalism. This rule gives us sound guidance, but it is nevertheless negative in import. The Board clearly implies that there are principles on which Christians can *not* "fairly differ." This leads us on to rougher terrain. It is easier to inventory negatives than to find a binding affirmative. Yet to find it is the basic problem of prophetic Christianity, both for the pulpit and for the pew.

Perhaps the Editor may be indulged to the extent of reproducing here two paragraphs that he wrote years ago—far removed from the current controversy. In a passage designed to suggest the functions and limitations of socially prophetic preaching, he said:

"All private, fortuitous judgments, all judgments of mere *means* to moral ends, are excluded from prophecy. The authority of love as a way of life that is applicable to all relationships, the sin in exploitation of other human beings, the stewardship of possessions . . . these are general truths of Christianity that are inescapable when the Christian tradition is taken seriously. These are things we hold to as corollaries of the centrality of Jesus Christ in the Christian ethic. We may well define the Christian social message as the faithful and relentless application to every relationship of the truth revealed in Christ. His personality is the complete warrant for the Christian message as an ethical imperative. But practical judgments as to what constitutes at any one time an appropriate embodiment of these absolutes in concrete programs of action—these judgments are qualitatively different. The church is concerned with them, to be sure, in its educational functions. The minister may deal with them as a part of his educational office. But he cannot say, 'Thus saith the Lord, this anti-lynching bill must pass in Congress.' He *can* say, 'Thus saith the Lord, the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.' Differences there may be concerning social expedients; there can be none about the enormity of the sin.

"To interpret this as meaning that the minister should avoid 'displeasing' people is, of course, to caricature it, and to miss entirely the meaning of the church. For the church is a spiritual community in which people consent to endure the passing of judgment upon their own waywardness and unfaithfulness. Only as its members participate in a vigorous and often painful examination of their own lives can the church be said to exist at all. An earnest people expects a minister to denounce its sins *but it must be done by appeal to a sanction which they corporately recognize.*"*

Professor John C. Bennett has very helpfully discussed this problem of finding a Christian consensus in his *Christian Ethics and Social Policy*. To this end he makes use of the concept, "middle axiom." A middle axiom, in this context, is a proposition that is too pointed to be shrugged off as a mere "generality," but at the same time not so specific in terms of procedure or device that equally wise and conscientious persons will differ on it. Dr. Bennett gives this as an illustration: "That the national community should prevent all private centers of economic power from becoming stronger than the government.† This is a good example. It furnishes both an imperative and a direction for action, yet it prescribes no specific legal prohibition or regulation. Another example is furnished by this proposition: "Segregation of human beings on the basis of color should cease." This principle can be subscribed to by members of a congregation, some of whom are ready to adopt forthwith a policy in accord with it, while some want to devise a time schedule, and some may even say, "God forgive us, we are not up to it. Would that we were." But to deny that it is Christian—that is hardly possible.

A social action group at any level of the church's life will encounter opposition from people who are unwilling to follow the lead of an exacting conscience, but it will win its way if it

* *The Social Gospel Re-Examined*, pp. 136-138.

† *Christian Ethics and Social Policy*, p. 81.

keeps within the ethical consensus which Christians recognize when they reflect soberly on the meaning of the Christian faith. They may stoutly resist a specific course of action, but they can be confronted with such strong imperatives that inaction will seem to be a sin. We suggest that it is along this line that the meaning of the Board of Review's principle of "substantial unanimity" is to be found.

Where does this leave us with reference to that very large area in which Christian social action groups in practically all the Protestant denominations have long been functioning, but about which, undoubtedly, "Christians may fairly differ"? Certainly, it sets a sharp limit to committing the church itself, and to making pronouncements on behalf of the church, with respect to specific political measures, or social policies or philosophies. But the admonition of the Board of Review to *seek a moral consensus within the church* implicitly requires an even more intensive application to social problems—their analysis, the clarification of alternative proposals with respect to them, and the cultivation of informed social concern on the part of the membership.

Mr. Reissig's comment on the use of the pulpit for what belongs in the lecture hall is very much in point. In the latter, the minister speaks as a member of the fellowship, precisely as a layman might speak. This stricture applies not only to the pulpit but to any group that undertakes to function under authorization of the church. To adapt the words of the Report, the ministers "speak *to* the churches rather than *for* them." It is a vital distinction. With all the tradition of a free pulpit behind him the Protestant minister is still not an *authority*; he is first among equals. No social action committee should aspire to be more than that. It has only the authority that is inherent in what it says and does. How delightfully St. Paul recognized the difference between prophecy and advice! In addressing the Corinthians he said at one point, "It is not I who say this; it's the Lord"; but a little later he assures them, "I am talking now, not the Lord."

By and large, these social action committees operate in areas where "Thus saith the Lord" is ruled out; or rather, they seek to help in the "implementing" of what the church of which they are a part has accepted *in principle* as divine command. They do not formulate consensus, but they confront the congregation with the implications of its creed and its commitments. Here they enjoy wide latitude—in research, in analysis, and in persuasion. The Report's language applied to the Council for Social Action is eminently applicable here: they "ought even to present views which have no support within the church if they are important to contemporary thought."

It is quite conceivable that a congregation *might* give a broader assignment to a social action committee. The committee might be authorized to make pronouncements *in its own right*, and without regard to the prevailing official position. A legislative committee, for example, composed in part, let us say, of Christian lawyers, might be permitted to make pronouncements on pending legislation on its own responsibility. In general, however, such authorization can be given and acted upon only in an area where there is overwhelming consensus.

Mr. Chester I. Barnard, chairman of the Board of Review, has in another connection made an important distinction between responsibility and authority. In spite of the common assumption that authority has to match responsibility, it is simple fact that there is a wide disparity between them. (A salesman, Mr. Barnard points out, has a heavy responsibility to make sales, but not a whit of authority to consummate a single one.) Christians bear an enormous responsibility to make the Gospel persuasive; they have no authority to secure its acceptance. The church itself, in its Protestant form, is a "community of persuasion."

We hazard the prediction that not a few of our readers will challenge Mr. Reissig's skepticism as to the improvement of the world over the past five hundred years, and also his view of the limited role human beings can play in relation to the Kingdom of God.

From a wholly practical viewpoint Mr. Reissig's impressive exposition of the role of the social action committee may raise some questions. Two queries, especially, are likely to arise: (1) Is *one* social action committee for the congregation desirable, or should there be several, with distinct functions? (2) Is a permanent, "standing" committee preferable to an "ad hoc" committee created in response to an urgent situation? Perhaps we should not try to generalize; much may depend on the size of the congregation, the location of the parish, and the mood of the membership. It would seem to be wise, however, to raise these questions from time to time, evaluating policy in the light of experience. If a committee "goes dead," it certainly should be buried. If it gets swamped with problems and starts going round in circles, "fission" may be indicated. One pretty reliable sign that it is time for a change is the calling of a meeting by the calendar and the working up of an agenda afterward. If meetings do not occur because of the compulsion of the agenda, the outlook is bad.

The most gratifying sequel to the present discussion would be a batch of reports from our readers on the subject: What is going on with respect to social action committees? What success has been achieved? What failures experienced? What dilemmas encountered? What fresh ideas are being incubated? In particular, how sound and practicable do the suggestions put forth in this issue look from the angle of the local church? Mr. Reissig's desk still has some place for "incoming mail."

—F. E. J.

About Our Correspondence

Frankly, our solicitation of correspondence has not yet brought us very much of the guidance which the Editorial Board is seeking. Nevertheless, we have some valued letters whose content will, we hope, interest our readers. They raise questions of great importance to a publication such as this—some of them very difficult to answer.

A particularly challenging communication comes from a prominent and gifted church woman who is troubled by what we call the "reading level" problem, which is one that has given us much concern. "If *Social Action*," she writes, "is to be used, for the most part, by ministers and lay leaders who turn to it for resource material when making a study of a given topic discussed within its pages, then it serves its purpose well. . . . However, if it is the intention of CSA to publish a magazine that will help the average reader to be informed and interested in such timely and important phases of today's world as are selected by the Editorial Board, then I question whether or not this purpose is fully achieved." Our correspondent refers particularly to "such words as one finds in 'This Freedom of Ours' "—the Editor's own doing!—which she regards as academic and beyond the ready comprehension of "the pew." This opinion is reinforced by that of a minister who is exceptionally well informed and who has himself had much editorial experience. The issue above referred to he finds clear and convincing, but "not easily understood." It required close study, and some re-reading. Yet he adds significantly, "I do not see how, with such a theme, this can be avoided."

A matter that has given the Editorial Board concern is that of art features. In the past much use has been made of photographs, charts, and drawings—some of the latter having a decidedly "modern" slant. Just one letter has been received asking why such drawings are not being used. We want to know how the readers feel about this. Undoubtedly, there is much difference of opinion as to the utility and desirability of these modern

art features. We wish we had some measure of it. And what about the cover design—combining two themes, the Cross and the Chalice?

One very competent critic feels the need of reading lists. The question arises whether the reader who looks for a bibliography does not normally find elsewhere more adequate lists than we could include without increasing the formidable aspect of the magazine which some complain of. The pointing up of issues by references and occasional quotations in a "commentary" has been, in some sense, a substitute for reading references. Then, too, there is an ever present danger in these days of nervousness and hypersensitiveness that the listing of a book will be taken for a blanket endorsement of its contents. Too bad, but that's the way it is. But the main question is, What do our readers want?

We have had appreciative letters about the issue on the United Nations, one of which expresses the wish that it "might be in the hands of every voter before next year's elections." Another commends the discussion but urges the claims of Federal Union in line with Clarence Streit's proposal.

On the other hand, a correspondent from the West Coast thinks our support of the United Nations unwarranted propaganda for internationalism, which he seems to identify with a global military policy. Still another writer thinks "some form of international organization is an absolute necessity in this era," but regards the U.N. as a "monstrosity," and mentions "such excrescences as ECOSOC and UNESCO."

It is too early to gauge reader reaction to the December issue.

Finally, we have a suggestion from an officer of Spiritual Mobilization that we reprint the leading article in *Faith and Freedom* (official magazine of the organization) for December, 1953. It is entitled "The Social Action Debate—A Case Study" and was written by the Editor, William Johnson. It is a rather long article, which takes a critical view of CSA. We are glad to call attention to it. It states a position of which we should all take respectful account. Our limited space will not, of course, admit of printing briefs from either "side."

NEW POST FOR SHIRLEY E. GREENE

The Reverend Shirley E. Greene of Merom, Indiana, joined the staff of the National Farmers Union on January 1 of this year, as Director of Inter-Group Relations. For the past seven years Mr. Greene has been the Agricultural Relations Secretary of the Council for Social Action. The C.S.A. is discontinuing the position of Agricultural Relations Secretary for financial reasons, but has requested the Committee to continue its advisory services to the national program.

The National Farmers Union (Farmers Educational and Cooperative Union) is a general farm organization carrying on programs of education, cooperative services and non-partisan political action. Its headquarters are in Denver, Colorado.

Mr. Greene's work will place primary emphasis on cooperation with church groups in the development of farm programs which conform to ethical principles and represent the broadest public interest.

He will work also with other groups who share similar objectives.

Mr. Greene's address for the immediate future will continue to be Merom, Indiana.